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Oral Storytelling in Ancient Greek and German Medieval Literature

1 Definition

Storytelling can be oral in various ways. The term “oral storytelling” covers different types of narrative: (1) conversational narratives spontaneously produced in spoken language; (2) traditional narratives transmitted orally from one generation to another without the aid of writing, including oral poetry, but also songs, magic spells, folktales, and genealogies; (3) oral poetry in a narrow sense, i.e., verse-form epic narratives composed in oral performance by a poet in the immediate presence of an audience. “Oral” thus refers not only to the distinction between “spoken” and “written” language, but also to different medial aspects of narratives: their transmission, composition, and performance as well as their cultural context (“oral predisposition”). This is the case particularly for oral poetry, which has been the main focus of diachronic narrativity. With respect to the question of how orality affects the diachronic patterns of ancient and medieval storytelling, it is thus vital to distinguish between different dimensions of orality and their different influence on narrative structure.

2 Dimensions of Orality

Investigations of oral storytelling in older stages of language are faced with two problems in particular. First, apparent “oral” residues are analyzed in texts that are preserved only in written form. Second, it is nowadays commonly acknowledged that orality and literacy are not two categories that can be dichotomously distinguished from each other. Rather, many narratives in older stages of language are characterized by the coexistence of orality and literacy (e.g., Bakker 1997b; Niles 1999; Chinca and Young 2005; Hall 2008). As a result, several dimensions of orality have been identified in order to do justice to the variety of different forms of oral storytelling.

2.1 Medial vs. Conceptual/Cognitive Orality

To describe orality in written historical texts, it is common to distinguish between “medial” and “conceptual” (Koch and Oesterreicher 1985) or “cognitive” (Fleischman

1990a, 1990b) orality. Whereas “medial orality” refers to the dichotomous distinction that language can be mediated either in spoken or written form, “cognitive” or “conceptual orality” is a graduated concept that accounts for the fact that a (written or spoken) text can more or less reflect an “oral style” irrespective of its actual medial realization. In this sense, oral features of written ancient and medieval narrative texts are conceptual/cognitive orality by definition. However, this conception remains vague, since there is no consensus as to what properties can be classified as general characteristics of oral storytelling. Rather, lists of supposed “oral” features are heterogeneous and comprise various phenomena which are not “oral” in the same way. Properties of oral poetry such as formulas and metrical patterns, for example, are supposed to reflect oral “online” composition and are seen as the result of cognitive conditions such as memorization and parsing in spoken language. Interjections, emotive expressions, and references to the “here and now” of the act of narration, on the other hand, are not characteristics of spoken language per se but of a narrative technique commonly referred to in terms of “vividness,” “immediacy,” and “enargeia,” and as such are linked to the concept of “involvement” (Chafe 1982). Conceptual orality thus mingles aspects of orality in the medial sense of the term and secondary phenomena like linguistic markers of deictic immediacy. In this respect, Lord ([1960] 2000, 13) distinguished between aspects *in* and aspects *for* performance, and Haferland (2019, 30) between poetic features tracing back to mnemonic techniques and production conditions on the one hand and stylistic choices on the other. This difference is vital for diachronic investigations of oral storytelling, since features linked to the medial restrictions of oral performance decrease with the influence of the written word, whereas features of involvement remain in use as stylistic devices (Fleischman 1990b, 88; Hennig 2009).

2.2 Primary vs. Secondary Orality

In the tradition of Walter J. Ong’s 1982 conception of “primary orality,” it is a common assumption that the language of societies that are unfamiliar with writing is “more oral” in general, since it is impacted by oral mental habits (e.g., Fleischman 1990a, 22; for a critical view, see Bakker 1997b; Hall 2008). In this respect, the language of pre-literate societies has been described as additive and paratactic rather than subordinating. It is also said to be more redundant, empathetic, and participatory, more grounded in human experience than in abstractions, and situated in the present, whereas written discourse tends toward distancing, abstraction, and detachment (Ong 1982, 36–56). “Secondary orality,” on the other hand, refers to the use of orality in literate communities, where it is “essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print” (Ong 1982, 133).

The distinction between primary and secondary orality does not refer primarily to linguistic characteristics but to the oral predisposition of a specific language community and thus to the cultural dimension of orality. This dimension of orality has been emphasized in investigations of oral poetry, as seen in Lord's definition of oral poetry as "narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write" ([1960] 2000, 4). Here, "oral" does not refer to oral communication in actual performance, but to the transmission of the poem from generation to generation (see also Innes 1998, 5).

2.3 Oral Composition, Performance, Reception, and Transmission

Many narratives of older stages of language, including epic poems from antiquity and the Middle Ages, cannot be ascribed to primary orality in the strict sense of the term, since writing was already established within certain spheres of life (J.-D. Müller 2012, 297). Due to juxtaposition of the spoken and the written word, narratives from antiquity and the Middle Ages have therefore been described as "semi-oral," "transitional," or "post-oral" texts. These terms have been criticized as they presuppose a straight line of development from orality to literacy, whereas it is nowadays commonly accepted that orality is a gradient property allowing for different constellations with respect to the relationship of spoken and written language within a society (Bakker 1997b; Amodio 2005).

This proves to be the case with respect to the large variety of different oral constellations. As shown by Finnegan (1977), the oral features that Milman Parry and Albert Lord described for the Homeric epics represent only one specific type of oral poetry out of many. Cross-linguistically, oral narratives "turn out to be different combinations of processes of composition, memorization and performance, with differing relationships between them according to cultural traditions, genres and individual poets" (Finnegan 1977, 86). In order to describe these varying combinations, it is thus necessary to classify poems according to the different parameters of composition, performance, and reception, as proposed by Foley (2002; Table 1).

In sum, oral poetry can be described as "oral" in more than one respect: (1) whether it is orally composed during the performance ("oral composition"), (2) whether its performance is oral ("oral performance and reception"), and (3) whether the stories belong to traditional knowledge that has been orally transmitted in a non-literate society ("oral transmission").

Table 1: Foley's (2002, 39) differentiation of oral constellations.

	Composition	Performance	Reception	Example
<i>Oral performance</i>	Oral	Oral	Aural	Tibetan paper-singer
<i>Voiced texts</i>	Written	Oral	Aural	Slam poetry
<i>Voices from the past</i>	O/W	O/W	A/W	Homer's <i>Odyssey</i>
<i>Written oral poems</i>	Written	Written	Written	Bishop Njegoš

2.4 Elaborated vs. Conversational Storytelling

For antiquity and the Middle Ages, records of conversational storytelling are rare and difficult to reconstruct. Investigations of oral storytelling in diachronic narratology have therefore mainly focused on oral poetry. Like conversational storytelling, oral poetry is performed in spoken language. It is thus subject to mnemonic and parsing restrictions and requires a spontaneous form of utterance. Oral narratives are therefore generally supposed to display a lesser degree of elaboration than written ones. Oral *poetry*, however, is a special type of speech that displays a high degree of elaboration. Both its vocabulary and syntax can differ from colloquial speech and constitute a new variety of language that differs from the vernacular (Finnegan 1977, 109). This has been debated particularly with regard to archaisms and neologisms, formulaic epithets, and dialectal variation in Homer's *Kunstsprache* (for an overview, see Bozzone 2016). It is also not uncommon for oral poetry to rely on "long-considered and deliberate composition before the moment of performance" (Finnegan 1977, 127), so that its composition cannot be compared to spontaneous speech production.

The artificiality of oral poetry has not only been seen as a result of mnemonic techniques such as meter and formulas, but also of the poet's intention to mark the content of the poems as extraordinary in comparison to the stories of everyday life (Finnegan 1977, 110). This "other-worldliness" of the narratives (Mellmann 2019, 214) is seen in the fact that in many oral traditions, conventionalized introductory formulas locate the stories in a distant mythical past (see my contribution on time and temporality in this volume). In this way, oral poems are comparable with literary narratives, which are also characterized by a break from the ordinary world of first-hand experience (on the diachronic relationship between the oral tradition and literary narratives, see Mellmann 2019 from an evolutionary perspective; Zeman 2020 from a linguistic perspective).

2.5 “Fictive,” “Simulated,” or “Pseudo-Orality”

Oral poems in ancient Greece and during the Middle Ages deviate from Ong’s primary orality due to the fact that writing was not completely unfamiliar in certain contexts of life. This has led to the question of whether the oral features in these poems might have been not an unconscious reflex of the mental habits and medial conditions of oral composition, but rather a deliberate stylistic choice to imitate oral performance. It has, for example, been discussed whether the formulaic nature of the *Nibelungenlied* is the result of “authentic” oral composition (Haferland 2019) or an intentional literalization of an oral narrative style (Curschman 1979, 97). In the latter case, the features would not indicate an oral substrate, but rather “fictive,” “simulated,” or “pseudo-orality” (“fingierte Mündlichkeit”; Goetsch 1985).

However, the concept of fictive orality has been brought into question. Since fictive orality presupposes a cultural context of secondary orality, it seems questionable whether it is appropriate to talk about fictive orality in ancient and in medieval epics (Knapp 2008; Glauch 2009; Haferland 2019). Consequently, Glauch has proposed the term “virtual orality,” which refers to the fact that the poem is conceptualized as a text that is intended to be performed orally but whose features do not result from fictionalizing an oral style.

3 Comparison between Homeric and Middle High German (MHG) Epic Poems

3.1 Oral Predisposition

Both medieval and the Homeric epics belong to “voices from the past” (Foley 2002), in other words to textual artifacts that have reached us in writing but that display features that are supposed to reflect their oral tradition. To evaluate the relationship between individual poems and orality, it is thus necessary to take the oral predisposition of their cultural context into account.

3.1.1 Ancient Greece: The Homeric epics

The investigation of oral poetry in ancient Greece is intricately linked to the work of Parry and Lord. Based on comparisons between the Homeric epics and South Slavic *guslari*, they argued that oral poems are profoundly different from literary ones and that this difference is reflected in particular in the use of formulas

and metric verse structure as linguistic traces of the oral performance situation. These findings have led to extensive studies within the paradigm of “oral formulaic theory.” While the oral hypothesis as a whole is still supported by many scholars today, recent studies have led to a more nuanced view. It has been shown, for example, that the Homeric epics diverge in several ways from Ong’s (1982) criteria of primary orality (e.g., Stanley 1993, 274, on the *Iliad*). Whereas the use of formulas, meter, and type-scenes is still seen as an indicator that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are “compositions in performance” (see Ready 2019, 4, with references), the high level of artificiality of the Homeric epics has been considered as inconsistent with the conditions of “online” production (Latacz 1989; Friedrich 2019). In this respect, it has been questioned whether macrostructural patterns such as ring composition (the arrangement of thematic elements in a form such as A-B-C-B-A) are compatible with the principles of oral composition or should rather be seen as an elaborate technique that presupposes the written word (Stanley 1993). Other features that have been interpreted as elements of literary language are “far-range reference” between different parts of a poem, thematic variability, and the non-schematized nature of Homeric similes (Stanley 1993; Friedrich 2019). The Homeric epics have therefore also been classified as “transitional” and “pastoral” (e.g., Friedrich 2019, who claims that Homer was an oral bard who became literate in the course of his career). On the other hand, investigations stimulated by recent advances in narratological and cognitive approaches have emphasized the oral roots of the Homeric poems anew (e.g., Minchin 2001; Bakker 2005; Bozzone 2016; Ready 2019).

3.1.2 Middle High German: Heroic and Courtly Epics

Middle High German (MHG) epic poems rely on both the oral and the written word. It is assumed that the poems were prepared with the aid of reading, since many poets emphasize their book-based erudition and their knowledge of the written sources of the narrated story. It is also assumed that the poems could be presented orally or read as texts, but that free oral presentation was rather the rule than the exception (Haferland 2004, 2019). There are, however, significant genre differences, as seen in the comparison between heroic and courtly epics (Philipowski 2007; Haferland 2019; Zeman 2022). Heroic epics commonly refer to Germanic epic cycles that were traditionally known. Their authors are not mentioned in the poems but remain anonymous, with the story starting immediately or after a short prologue. These properties have been seen as an indication that heroic epics were transmitted without the aid of the written word before their transcription as texts (see

Philipowski 2007, 49–57, with further references). Courtly epics, in contrast, can frequently be ascribed to a specific author who often mentions himself in a prologue that precedes the actual story, stressing that the “truth” of the story is backed up by written sources. The coexistence of heroic and courtly epics in MHG – which belong to the same cultural background but nevertheless display different oral constellations – suggests that literary and oral textual strategies during the Middle Ages are characterized by symbiosis and interference (Innes 1998, 9; J.-D. Müller 2012, 297; Haferland 2019, 60).

The interference of oral and literate features also pertains to individual texts, as seen in the example of the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1190/1200). Its metrical-stanzaic form, the emphasis on visual and spatial representations, stereotypical patterns for the representation of thematic scenes such as battles, festivals, arrivals, and departures, as well as incongruences in the text have been taken as arguments that the production of the text was based on memory (Haferland 2019, 55) and was “without doubt” (J.-D. Müller 2012, 315) composed for recitation in an oral performance. On the other hand, the *Nibelungenlied* gives no evidence of *Stabreimdichtung*, and integrates schemata and topoi from the literary tradition of the courtly epic, a feature which is unusual for heroic epics (Haferland 2019, 39). Moreover, there is no formula thesaurus (Miedema 2011, 38–44), and it has been questioned whether the large-scale form and artificiality of the stanzaic structure would have been consistent with oral composition in performance or would have presupposed the aid of the written word. Therefore, the *Nibelungenlied* has been interpreted both as a “book epic,” an epic composed in written form but intended to be read and performed orally (Heusler 1956; J.-D. Müller 2012; Heinzle 2013), and as a text primarily based on memory that also displays literary principles (Haferland 2019).

3.1.3 Features of Oral Storytelling in MHG and Homeric Epic Poems

Various features of narrative have been classified as oral, such as formulas, syntactic breaks, paratactic structure, “illogical” narrative chronology, tense alternations, epithets, “fluidity” of the text, and so on. These features, however, do not represent a homogeneous class but are linked to different parameters of orality. A distinction can be drawn between features of (1) the language of oral composition, (2) the language of “immediacy” and “visuality,” and (3) macrostructural properties that have been discussed in connection with the oral predisposition of the narratives.

3.2 The Language of Oral Composition

3.2.1 Formula, Formulaic Expressions, and Metrical Form

Since the seminal studies on oral poetry by Parry and Lord, formula and meter have been seen as the most prototypical indicators of the oral production of the epic poems. According to Parry and Lord, metrical form and formulas – “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (Lord [1960] 2000, 4) – allow the poet to compose long epic poems “online” in a performance situation. Formulas and formulaic expressions are seen as a mnemonic technique, since they can be used as prefabricated parts and thus unburden the poet’s working memory. According to oral formulaic theory, a high frequency of formulas in a text indicates a high degree of orality.

More recent studies have called for a more nuanced view. For example, it has been shown that Homeric formulas are not fixed building blocks but are flexible enough to be integrated into different metrical environments (e.g., Visser 1987). Bozzone (2016, 96–98) distinguishes between more flexible constructions and “fossilized” ones. For MHG epic poems, it has been stated that there is no formula thesaurus (Miedema 2011, 38–44). In the *Nibelungenlied*, for example, epithets like “Kriemhild the noble queen” are neither fixed nor frequently used, but are employed as sentence patterns that show a rich variation of expression (Miedema 2011, 38–44; Haferland 2004, 337; 2019, 57–58). While the differing formulaic character of MHG and Homeric epics does not allow for a reliable evaluation with respect to their oral character, the use of constructional building blocks can be seen as a common feature characteristic of spoken language.

Alongside the formal character of formulaic expressions, semantic aspects have also been discussed in connection with the oral hypothesis. Formulaic expressions in the Homeric epics have been described as words that “store” shared traditional knowledge and represent the world “as all men [. . .] commonly receive it” (Parry 1956, 3). Consequently, epithets such as πόδας ὠκύς Ἀχιλλεύς (swift-footed Achilles) are more than ornamental stylistic devices. By attributing a memorable quality to a character, an epithet refers to the protagonist’s “larger identity across the epic tradition” (Foley 2007, 15). The use of formulaic speech thus reaches beyond technical necessity by pointing toward the protagonist’s status within the larger tradition.

3.2.2 Themes and Type-Scenes

In addition to formulas, oral epics are also characterized by the frequent occurrence of conventional themes (“type-scenes”) such as battles, arrivals and departures,

feasts, and festivals. In the *Nibelungenlied*, for example, the pattern for arrival at court follows a fixed script: arrival of the envoys, welcome by the servants, the ruler's asking about the guests, meeting of guests and court society, request for permission to convey the message (Dürrenmatt 1945, 26; see Arend 1933 and Edwards 1992 for an overview of type-scenes in the Homeric epics). Such stereotypical representations of events have been seen as building blocks that facilitate composition in performance.

The use of these traditional scripts, however, can also trigger semantic effects within specific contexts. One example is the famous scene where Achilles and Priam share a meal after negotiating the handing over of Hector's body (*Iliad* 24.621–627). By referring to a ritualistic context, the description of the feast can be seen as a reference to “the kosmos of the properly functioning Homeric society” (Foley 1991, 34–35). The description of the scene is thus not just a mnemonic device but represents Priam and Achilles's agreement as a return to “normal human behavior” that is consonant with social values (de Jong 1991, 416). Type-scenes are thus “not merely a structural blueprint for constructing epic narrative, but an opportunity to situate individualized events and moments within a traditionally reverberative frame” (Foley 2007, 16).

3.2.3 Repetitions

Another feature that has been classified as a persistent constant of oral poetry is repetition. At first sight, repetitions can be seen as a consequence of formulaic language, since the repetitive use of formulas and formulaic expressions leads to the representation of characters, objects, and “type-scenes” (Arend 1933) in a very similar manner. Longer verbatim repetitions of narrative events (“narrative repetitions”) have also been described as a result of “this kind of recycling process” within the formulaic system (Nagy 2004, 143). It has further been assumed that narrative repetitions facilitate reception of the poem for the reader. In this sense, they are seen as a matter of both performance and composition (Nagy 2004).

However, repetitions are not only technical devices but can serve a variety of narrative functions. In the Homeric epics, repetitions are frequent in reported messages as well as in commands, requests, and wishes (de Jong 1991, 414–415; Eide 1999, 97). Such repetitions (e.g., an order to do something and the subsequent report that the order has been executed) often frame the actual event and thus contribute to the structuring of the narratives. In addition, repetitions can be used to perspectivize one event from different angles. An insightful example is the prolepsis of the fall of Troy as uttered by both Agamemnon exhorting his men and Hector in his conversation with Andromache.

- (1) For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it.
 There will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish,
 and Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong ash spear. (*Iliad* 4.163–165,
 6.443–449, quoted in de Jong 1991, 415)

Attributed once to one of the later winners of the Trojan War and once to one of its later losers, the statement alludes to the outcome of the war from two perspectives: the prospect of glorious victory and the fate of total ruin (de Jong 1991, 416). At the same time, the verbatim repetition links the two passages together and contributes to the dense network of foreshadowing that is typical for the *Iliad* (Grethlein 2010). Verbatim repetition can thus be used as a “meaningful, instead of a purely mnemonic, device” (de Jong 1991, 417).

In MHG epics, repetitions are not restricted to formulaic and schematic expressions, but can be used both to structure the narrative and picture an event from different perspectives. In the *Eneasroman* (ca. 1190) by Heinrich von Veldeke, for example, the story of Aeneas’s flight from Troy is narrated twice: once at the beginning of the story by the narrator and once by Aeneas in Carthage himself. These two narrations are not verbatim repetitions but elaborate subtle contrasts between narratorial and figural perspective (Fromm 1996; Zimmermann 2017, 93).

3.2.4 Intonation Units

Traces of oral composition have also been found in the syntactic patterns of oral poetry. In this respect, it has been claimed that oral poetry – like spoken discourse – is not structured by sentences as units of the written word, but by intonation units, i.e. smaller chunks of information set off by pauses and changes in intonation (Bakker 1998, 39; Bozzone 2016). These intonation units may correlate with one verse line, but they can also exceed the verse boundary. Such enjambments have a variety of stylistic, rhythmic, and narrative effects (Bakker 2005, 54). Clusters of enjambments can, for example, create “areas of metrical turbulence” and emphasize the “emotional high points in the narrative” (54). It can be supposed that the full potential of intonation units is revealed only in live performance (55).

Another pattern linked to the intonation unit is “left-dislocation.” From the perspective of written language, left-dislocation is the positioning of a sentential constituent outside a sentence such as *My aunt, she used to sing folk songs*, which has been described as a general characteristic for oral narratives (Chafe 1994, 67–68). This pattern is a common feature of the Homeric epics (e.g., Bakker 1997a, chap. 5; Bonifazi and Elmer 2011; de Kreij 2016; Ready 2019). See (2), where the “pendant

nominative” (*Patroklos dé*) presents the subject as an isolated referent within its own intonation unit.

- (2) And PATROCLUS, | as long as the Achaeans and Trojans
 were fighting around the wall, | far from the ships, |
 all the while HE, | in the tent of pleasant Eurypylus, |
 (*Iliad*, 15.390–392; example from de Kreij 2016, 151)

The frequent use of this pattern in the Homeric epics has been taken as an argument that the Homeric epics are “characterized by a thoroughly oral conception” (Bakker 1998, 41). In addition, it has a discourse functional role, as it marks the protagonist as the center of the following lines of discourse and thus serves as a feature of ‘framing’ and ‘priming’ (Bakker 1997a, 86–111; de Kreij 2016). Once it is conventionalized, moreover, the pattern can become a metanarrative signal to mark the beginning of a new scene (de Kreij 2016, 164).

MHG epic poems also display a frequent use of left-dislocations. Consider (3):

- (3) Four hundred KNIGHT’S ATTENDANTS | THEY were about to wear knightly
 clothes | together with Siegfried. (*Nibelungenlied B*, 30.1)

In the *Nibelungenlied*, this pattern is more frequent in narrative passages than in direct speech (Zeman 2022). This supports the hypothesis that the pattern might be an oral feature but is also conventionalized with respect to different discourse and narrative functions. As such, left-dislocation is not just an “oral” feature but part of the narrative syntax.

3.3 Language of “Immediacy” and “Visuality”

Both the Homeric and medieval epic poems have been characterized by their “vividness” and “optic quality” (see Fleischman 1990b for the Middle Ages; Grethlein and Huitink 2017 for an overview of the Homeric epics). According to the common view, it is the simultaneity between the act of performance and the act of reception that leads poets to represent the story “as if observing them now” (Fleischman 1990b, 265), to “appeal expressly to the addressee’s senses” and to “place the object of reference within his or her perceptual sphere” (Elmer 2009, 43). There are two kinds of linguistic elements that are discussed with respect to the language of “immediacy” and “visuality”: (1) linguistic features of the “immediate mode” (Chafe 1994) that establish a shared communicative frame in terms of deictic proximity and involvement such as present tense forms, deictics of the “here and now,” verbs

of perception, and direct speech representation; (2) linguistic features of “optic poetics” such as detailed descriptions, ekphrasis, and similes.

3.3.1 The Present Tense

One of the most prominent expressions in oral narratives that has been discussed under the label of vividness, immediacy, and *enargeia* is the use of the present tense. To account for the narrative functions of the present tense in the epic poems, two different uses have to be distinguished in particular: the “narrator’s present” and the “historical present.” The narrator’s present refers to “discourse now,” that is, the time of storytelling, linked to the voice of the narrator. In MHG epic poems, it is frequently used to interpret and evaluate the behavior of the protagonists from the narrator’s point of view (4) or to comment on the subsequent story line (5).

(4) I [i.e., the narrator] think they are both right. (Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, 264.25)

(5) Now look, there comes near a distress to them. (Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, 407.10)

In these examples, the use of the present tense interrupts the sequence of events. Further linguistic means such as the imperative of the verb of perception (“look!”) and the deictic “now” establish a space of communication shared by the poet and the audience, both of whom “look at” the narrated events. In this way, the narrator’s present is not a feature of orality in the technical sense, but of performed narrativity. It can function as a metalinguistic device that “establishes the discourse as something other than narration” (Fleischman 1990b, 306).

On the other hand, the present tense can be used to denote past events of the plot in alternation with past tenses (e.g., *he came in and sees* [. . .]). This “historical present” can trigger a number of stylistic effects. It often emphasizes the dynamic nature of the sequence of events and marks the culmination point of a story (see also my contribution on time and temporality in this volume). In this respect, it has also been argued that it is not the present tense form itself but rather the alternation pattern between past and present tenses that is responsible for the “vivid” effects within the narrative (Wolfson 1980; Fludernik 1991). Accordingly, the oral pattern has been seen not in the historical present itself, but in “tense confusion” (Fleischman 1990b), that is, the use of shifting tense forms which are not necessarily concordant with the respective temporal values of the denoted events.

The historical present has been attested for many narratives of older stages of language, including Biblical Hebrew (Cotrozzi 2010), Ancient Greek (Sicking and Stork 1997), Old French (Fleischman 1990b), and Middle English (Fludernik 1991, 1992). It does not occur, however, in the Homeric epic poems (Bakker 1997b, 2005) or in MHG (Herchenbach 1911; Boezinger 1912). The development in German, where the historical present in its narrow form is not attested until the sixteenth century (Boezinger 1912, 12), an age characterized by a high level of literacy, raises the question as to whether there is indeed a direct link between the use of the historical present and oral poetry (Zeman 2016).

3.3.2 Markers of Involvement: Deixis, Interjections, Expressives

It is commonly assumed that the primary “now” of oral poetry is the moment of performance, and that this “discourse now” also constitutes the primary reference point for the epic’s deictic orientation (Bakker 2005, 175; Kawashima 2004, 146). The discourse now can be marked by several linguistic features throughout the poem including deictic adverbials like “here” and “now,” first-person pronouns, and expressive interjections. A famous example for the reference to the “now” of the act of performance is the invocation of the muses in Homer (*Sing now to me, Muses*; *Iliad* 2.484) and the address to the audience in MHG prologues (*Now listen carefully everyone*; *Herzog Ernst* [ca. 1180], 1). For the Homeric epics, it is characteristic that the “now” of performance remains actualized throughout the whole narration. This is seen in the fact that features of the immediate mode such as the hearer-oriented demonstrative οὐτως (this) can be used to “point” to a referent within the storyworld as if he were present “before the eyes” within the “here and now” (Bakker 2005, 75–79). In the same respect, other linguistic markers like the augment (127), the aorist (169), and particles referring to “here and now” like ἄρα and several discourse markers (Bonifazi 2008) have been seen as linked to the performance mode of epic poems.

Due to the conceptualized simultaneity between the performance and the events happening within the story, it is also possible for the narrator to address the characters directly (de Jong 2009, 93–97), as in (6):

- (6) Then who was the first, and who the last that you killed,
 Patroclus, when the gods called you to your death? (*Iliad* 16.692–693; discussed
 in de Jong 2009, 93–94)

Such apostrophes to the characters give the impression that the protagonists are “real” (de Jong 2009, 95) and can thus be seen as instances of enargeia. This is sup-

ported by the fact that apostrophes also often mark a turning point in the narrative (de Jong 2009, 96).

The “here and now” of the act of narration is also an important reference point in MHG epic poems. This can be indicated by deictic adverbials, the use of the present tense, verbs of perception and interjections that “intrude” on the plot, as in (7–8):

- (7) and when he came again to Tintajol,
to the court,
look, there he heard and got to know
in alleys and in streets
due to laments such a behavior
that it troubled him very much. (Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, 6018–6023)
- (8) *alas how* many chainmails the bold Dancwart broke there! (*Nibelungenlied B*, 212.4)

In contrast to examples of the narrator’s present above (4–5), (7–8) are not meta-textual instances but refer to the narrative events of the plotline in the storyworld. Nevertheless, linguistic features of the immediate mode such as the imperative of the verb of perception (“look!”) are used, which establish a communicative situation shared by the poet and the audience. Similarly, the exclamatory interjection “*hei waz*” (alas how) in (8) gives the impression that the narrating and perceiving act and the narrated events are happening simultaneously. In both the Homeric and MHG epics, the language of immediacy can thus “intrude” on the narrative mode and lead to the conflation of proximity and distance.

3.3.3 Speech and Thought Representation

Oral poetry is characterized by extensive use of direct speech, which has also been seen as a feature intended to make the poems more vivid (Beck 2012). But its relationship to orality is not straightforward. This can be seen in the discussion on speech introductions. Introductory verses of speech are frequent and often tend to be formulaic, as in such patterns as “And to him/her spoke in answer SUBJECT of many devices,” in the Homeric epics or; in MHG: “do sprach SUBJECT” (then spoke SUBJECT). On the one hand, it has been argued that the frequent use of introductory phrases is an oral feature, since the oral performance situation does not allow for the use of typographical signs and hence requires explicit markers that indi-

cate the beginning of a speech or a change of speaker (de Jong 1991, 409). Maier (2015), on the other hand, has argued that it is due to marking by paralinguistic means in oral performance that explicit markers of direct speech are not necessary. One of his arguments for this position is the fact that the Homeric epics allow for “slipping” from indirect into direct speech within the same construction without explicit marking.

A striking pattern of direct speech without explicit introductory formulas in MHG epics before 1200 is *stichomythia* – a dispute in which the speakers exchange short utterances that commonly end within one verse line. This rhetorical device, originally characteristic for drama (Miedema 2007, 268–269), has also been interpreted as an oral feature, since it mimics conversational disputes. It is assumed that *stichomythia* was a particularly enjoyable part within the performance, probably combined with paralinguistic means such as intonation, pitch, volume, gestures, and facial expression. This has also been seen as an explanation as to why *stichomythia* vanishes in postclassical epics when writing became more common (M. E. Müller 2007, 136).

3.3.4 Ekphrasis and Similes

Another feature discussed in connection with oral poetic is *ekphrasis* – detailed descriptions of battles, tournaments, and ceremonials as well as depictions of special objects such as clothes and weapons. Since such descriptions give the impression that the narrator adopts the stance of an eyewitness, they have also been seen as connected with the “vivid” style of oral poetry. However, *ekphrasis* and other “pictorial” devices are not directly linked to the mode of composition. Grethlein and Huitink have criticized the pictorial theory of perception that underpins descriptions of poetry as “mental pictures” and shown that readerly visualization of the Homeric epics is not the result of the amount of “pictorial” detail, but rather of “multimodal sensory, cognitive and emotional appeal” (2017, 86).

For MHG epics, it has been shown that *ekphrastic* descriptions prototypically describe clothes, weapons, and other artifacts that are marked as exceptional. As Starkey (2016) has shown, they are used not only to create the illusion of a realistic picture, but also to demonstrate the rhetorical artistry of the poet. In a similar way, pictorial similes are often found within the narrator’s reflection on poetic composition (Starkey 2016, 186). Medieval *ekphrasis* and similes thus involve a metanarrative component. Although they are traditional elements, pictorial descriptions and similes are not primarily oral features (see Ready 2018 for the Homeric simile as interface between tradition and innovation).

3.4 Macrostructural Properties

3.4.1 Episodic Structure

Ancient and medieval stories have often been described as “single-stranded.” For the Homeric epics, it has been argued that they represent the story as a homogeneous, continuous flow of narration, since the poet narrates what he “sees” in front of his mental eyes. The conditions of oral performance are supposed to shape the narrative macrostructure. Since the “stream of memory” makes it difficult to pursue several plots simultaneously, oral poems commonly focus on one main plot. Any subplots that might be introduced into the story do not exist independently from this main plot and are therefore not mentioned until they come into the “vision” of the poet (Kawashima 2008, 115). The connection between these subplots is often left underspecified, which adds up to the impression that they are not represented as happening simultaneously in the different mental subworlds (see also my contribution on time and temporality in this volume for a discussion of Zielinski’s Law).

Similar things have also been said about the *Nibelungenlied*, whereas later MHG romances have been characterized by a more complex network of subplots. An indicator for a change of the narrative macrostructure can be seen in the marking of scene shifts. In the Homeric, as in MHG epics, explicit episode markers are not common. In the *Iliad*, the progression of the story is often indicated just by particles like *de* (and, but), marking the units as a new step in the sequence of events (Bakker 2005, 69). In MHG epics, the frequent use of the particle *dô* (then) structures the progression of the events, as is also known for everyday oral storytelling (“and *then* she said, and *then* I said [. . .]”). The increase in the number of explicit markers of scene shifts, which are still rare in the *Nibelungenlied*, seems to correlate with the introduction of multiple subplots. Formulaic expressions, as in (9), indicate a change of focus from one mental subworld to another, while the subworlds are conceptualized as existing simultaneously within the narrative world.

- (9) *die rede lât sîn, hoert waz geschiht*
 dâ wir diz maere liezen ê. (Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, 207.4–5)

(*Let’s leave this talk; listen to what happens*
 where we left this story before.)

As Fludernik (2003, 335) has shown, similar scene-shift markers such as “Now lat hem rede, and torne we anon To [. . .]” are used extensively in Middle English verse narratives, namely, in romances and in saints’ legends, but also in Chaucer.

According to her, these markers served to structure the course of events during oral delivery of the narrative and were later refunctionalized as an ironizing and meta-fictional technique in Renaissance texts. In German, these patterns become more frequent in complex prose romances like the *Prosalancelot*, where the expression has been conventionalized as a scene-shift marker.

- (10) now we will leave the story about Bertelac and his wife for a while and speak further about King Arthur and his wife the queen and about Galahot's dream. The story tells us that [. . .]. (*Prosalancelot* II [3, 26])

3.4.2 Narrative Complexity

Epics are commonly large-scale poems, and it has been debated whether their length is consistent with oral performance or would require the aid of the written word, as argued by Stanley (1993) and Friedrich (2019) for the Homeric epics and by Jan-Dirk Müller (2012) for the classification of the *Nibelungenlied* as a “book epic.” Furthermore, the consistency of the plotline and the dense network of prolepses and analepses in the Homeric epics and in MHG epics have been seen as literary rather than oral features.

Other macrostructural properties that have been discussed with respect to the oral status of epic poems are lists (e.g., the extensive catalogue of ships, as discussed by Visser 1987) and the ring composition – the representation of thematic elements in an A-B-C-B-A structure. Ring composition has been evaluated both as an oral compositional device and as an artistic pattern of elaboration (e.g., Ready 2019, 10). On the one hand, it has commonly been seen as a result of the medial conditions of oral performance (Nimis 1998, 66; Sale 1996, 40) and as an expansion of common practices found in everyday oral conversation (Person 2016, 30). On the other hand, the A-B-C-B-A pattern has also been characterized as a structure that is characteristic for many narratives cross-linguistically, and thus not specific to oral composition. Furthermore, ring composition has been described as a literate principle of elaboration whose complexity cannot be deduced from the principles of oral composition (Stanley 1993). In this respect, it has also been argued that ring composition might originally have been a mnemonic device, only to become an artistic architectonic principle in the *Iliad* (Whitman 1958, 98). The different evaluations show once again that elaboration and orality are not categories that exclude each other.

4 Impact of Orality on the Development of Narratological Concepts

As seen above, no single straight line of development from orality to literacy can be assumed. First, both ancient and medieval storytelling are characterized by a mutual interplay between the oral and the literate and thus resist description following a teleological model (cf. Innes 1998, 36). Second, narratives are influenced by various factors including cultural context, genre, and rhetoric. Investigation of the relationship between aspects of orality, oral features, and narrative functions in their diachronic development thus remains a relevant topic for future research. For diachronic narratology, this is particularly important, since it is assumed that orality had a significant impact on the development of basic narratological concepts. In this respect, the following hypotheses have been proposed.

4.1 Hypothesis 1: Shift from “Discourse Now” to “Story Now”

Oral poetry has commonly been characterized by the dominance of the teller frame, since it is the memorizing act of the poet that constitutes the primary reference point of storytelling. As described above, oral poetry is characterized by frequent references to “discourse now” and to the common space shared by the narrator and the audience. This “grammar of immediacy” also intrudes on the plot so that deictics of proximity can be used to refer to protagonists in a distant mythical past. As soon as epics become less dependent on active memory and verbal reactualization, the focus on “discourse now” is gradually weakened while the dynamic “story now” in the progression of events becomes the more important reference point (Bakker 2005; Kawashima 2008). One indicator for this general development can be seen in the fact that MHG epic poems establish a clear distinction between the teller frame and the narrated world, reflected in the distribution of verb tenses. While the present tenses indicate the discourse world of the narrating act, the narrative tense of the preterit in combination with the continuous use of *dô* (then, at that time) denotes events in the storyworld. With respect to Ancient Greek, Bakker (2005, 163) has shown that the particle “now” in Homer is only used to denote “discourse now,” but that it later became a marker of “story now” in the narratives of Thucydides. This might indicate a decreasing focus shift from “discourse now” to the events in the storyworld.

4.2 Hypothesis 2: Increase of Metanarrativity and the Emergence of a Fictional Narrator

It is held by some that the rise of literacy correlates with the increased use of self-reflexive and metanarrative comments. However, this connection is not straightforward. On the one hand, self-reflexive comments that address the difficulties of composition are not uncommon for oral poetry (see Finnegan 1977, 80, for examples in different oral traditions). On the other hand, self-reflexive and metatextual comments have been seen as indicators for a more playful and ironizing mode that is considered to be inconsistent with the memorizing act of the oral poet. Unlike heroic epics, MHG courtly epics, for instance, are characterized by frequent metatextual comments by the narrator on rhetorical decisions, poetic artistry, and references to other poets. Also, dialogues between the narrator and personifications of *Minne* and *Aventure* are characteristic for the artificial style of courtly epics (e.g., Starkey 2016). Furthermore, narrators refer to rhetorical strategies and genre traditions in a more playful way than it is the case in heroic epics. In *Iwein* (ca. 1200) by Hartmann von Aue, for example, the description of the duel between Askalon and Iwein is interrupted, and the narrator affirms that there have been no eyewitnesses of the event. After that, the fight is described in great detail, including thought representation of the protagonists (Reuvekamp-Felber 2013, 425). Such play with genre expectations is seen as an indication that courtly epics have been removed farther from the oral tradition where the story is composed as an act of memorization. For the Homeric epics, there has been discussion as to whether the inventive and ironic use of traditional language in Homer indicates that the Homeric text is already located “at some remove from its roots in oral tradition” (Foley 1993, 278). The interpretation of metatextual and self-reflexive language in individual poems is thus often controversial.

The interpretation of self-reflexive and metatextual comments is closely related to general questions about the status of the narrator. The oral tradition is commonly characterized by the fact that author and narrator are the same person and thus indistinguishable. In contrast, the self-reflexive nature of courtly epics has sometimes been seen as evidence for the emergence of a fictive narrative instance to be distinguished from the actual composer of the poem. While the status of the narrator in MHG is a controversial subject (for an overview, see Glauch 2009), a similar development has been observed in Ancient Greek literature. In contrast to the narrator of the Homeric epics, the later prose narrator “fictionalizes the act of perception” (Bakker 2005, 67). The invention of a fictional voice as “the substitute of the absent author’s actual voice” (Bakker 1998, 32) has thus come to be seen more as a general tendency linked to medial change.

4.3 Hypothesis 3: The Rise of Fictionality

For oral poetry, the narrator has been described as the medial link between the audience and traditional knowledge that has been transmuted from generation to generation. As a bearer of tradition, he does not create a new story but recreates a traditional one during performance. While the general gist of the story is thus a given, the poet can expand, abbreviate, or change the narrative focus in his act of storytelling. Since the story is recreated anew by each poet in each oral performance, tradition manifests itself in countless variations (Jensen 2017, 9). Oral poems have thus been seen as “fluid” and “unstable.” Since there is no fixed text that would allow for a comparison of different versions, the fluidity of oral poetry has also been linked to the fact that oral traditions do not rely on the same distinction between fact and fiction as literary traditions. It has been observed that epic poems do not refer to an “objective reality independent of the narrator (the epic singer),” but to an epic past that exists “only as perception, both in the memory of the singer and the imagination of his audience” (Kawashima 2008, 114), underwritten by the poet’s active mental process of remembering (Bakker 2005; Bäuml 1997, 39). According to Mellmann, what is important for oral poetry is not the opposition between fact and fiction, but rather the “transition from first-hand knowledge to knowledge handed on by nameable persons and, finally, to anonymous tradition” (2019, 219).

This becomes different with the rise of literacy. As soon as written sources become available that allow for comparing different versions of one story, narrative “truth” is guaranteed by the literacy of the poet that allows access to a knowledge stored in books. This is reflected in the fact that many narrators in MHG courtly epics showcase their erudition in order to present the “right” version of a story. See, for example, the narrator’s prologue in Gottfried von Straßburg’s *Tristan* (ca. 1210), which ensures that he will tell the story “rehte” (rightly) by referring to the “right” literary source.

- (11) I know well, there are many people
 who have *read* about Tristan;
 however, there aren’t many people
 who have read about Tristan *rightly* [*rehte*]
 [. . .]
 but as I said,
 that they haven’t *read rightly*,
 this is true, as I tell you:
 they did not tell it *in the right way*
 as Thomas from Britain does,

who was the master of *âventiure*
 and read in Breton books
 about the sovereigns' lives
 and has given it to us as knowledge.
 As he tells about Tristan,
the right version and the truth,
 I began searching eagerly
 in books both in
 Romance and Latin
 and started to take pains
 that I *in his right way*
rectify this poem. (Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, 131–162)

Such affirmations that address the source of the narrated story are very common (e.g., the metatextual reference in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, 115.27, where the narrator parodies this genre feature by asserting that he does not know a single alphabetic character; J.-D. Müller 2012, 305). Courtly epics thus incorporate a different concept of narrative truth from epics of primary orality, where the source of the story is anonymous tradition. This change of attitude has also been seen as the prerequisite for the "invention" of fictionality in the Middle Ages (for an overview, see Schaefer 1996; Reuvekamp-Felber 2013). In this respect, ironic, parodic, and allegorical elements as described in section 4.2 have been seen as experiments "with the possibilities of fiction" (Starkey 2016, 184).

5 Conclusion: Orality and Diachronic Narratology

Orality in general and oral formulaic theory in particular have long been dominant research paradigms for investigations of ancient and medieval narratives. As seen in the comparison between the Homeric and MHG epic poems, the differences with respect to cultural constellations and genre conventions do not allow for tracing out straight lines of development from orality to literacy, but require a more nuanced view (see Hall 2008 and Kelly 2012 for critical overviews). Such a differentiated view is important, since orality remains a crucial concept for diachronic narratology in several respects.

- (1) As this overview has sought to show, the technicalities of spoken language and the localization of the act of narration within a communicative space shared between the poet and the audience as well as the oral transmission of poetry over historical time leave traces on the language and structure of oral poetry in

different ways. To understand the development of oral features, it is therefore crucial to investigate which aspects of orality have an impact on which linguistic elements.

- (2) Comparison between Ancient Greek and MHG epics has shown that many oral features display narrative functions. A better understanding of the relationship between oral features and their influence on linguistic structure is thus a prerequisite to identifying more general mechanisms of change such as the conventionalization of traditional patterns into metatextual discourse and genre markers.
- (3) Orality is also a relevant concept for investigating the relationship between everyday storytelling and literary genre conventions. As shown in this article, oral poems share many features with everyday oral storytelling and characteristics that are found in later literary narratives, such as considerable elaboration and a break from the ordinary world of first-hand experience. First-hand experience and anonymous tradition must thus be distinguished as two different sources of narratives whose relation to each other as well as to modern literary styles and genres still remains to be explored by diachronic narratology.
- (4) Most importantly for diachronic narratology, orality is also closely linked to questions about the development of narratological concepts. As seen above, concepts such as narrator, focalization, fictionality, and so on are discussed with respect both to oral communication and to transmission by oral means over historical time. A more nuanced view of orality will thus allow new insights to be gained not only into the specific aesthetics of oral storytelling in historical contexts and the development of narrative techniques, but also into the history of basic narratological concepts.

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